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ABSTRACT

A self-instructional audiocassette/workbook training kit, Learn INFORM, was designed to teach new users how to search the database ABI/INFORM and to help more experienced searchers sharpen their searching skills. The 35-minute audiocassette is a dialogue between an information specialist and an end user, while the step-by-step workbook includes exercises, search samples, and a guide to using ABI/INFORM on each system where the file is available. Group sessions were implemented with six online user groups to assess its effectiveness in a group setting; a designated leader operated the tape player and served as a moderator for each group. An ABI/INFORM training survey was sent to 60 attendees in four of the six groups. Of the 46 (77%) respondents, 85% had at least 6-months search experience, although 57% rarely searched ABI/INFORM. The audiocassette and workbook were generally viewed favorably, and overall responses to the session were positive. Weaknesses identified concerned the difficulty of matching the level of instruction to searcher experience and the dramatic approach used in the audiotapes, which some respondents considered to be either unrealistic or unflattering to librarians. The training survey form is included. (Author/LMM)

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USING AN AUDIO CASSETTE AND WORKBOOK FOR GROUP TRAINING

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USING AN AUDIO CASSETTE AND WORKBOOK FOR GROUP TRAINING

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Abstract: A self-instructional audio cassette/workbook training kit, Learn INFORM, was published by Data Courier in 1981. Since March 1982, the innovative training aid has been used by online user groups. Sixty attendees of these group sessions were surveyed. Responses were generally very favorable, but several weaknesses were identified. Data Courier plans to extend this training program to include the Pharmaceutical News Index database. It is predicted that the flexibility and economy of similar alternative training methods will spark a range of new training options for information specialists.

Introduction

In March 1982, Data Courier embarked on a new type of training program for online searchers. Never before had a database publisher offered training through audio tape and workbook with technical support over a toll-free telephone line and free search time. This program was offered without charge to the participants.

We had relied in the past principally upon in-person training. The special needs of some user groups for specific program times and our own commitment to provide free training spurred us to test a different approach.

Learn INFORM has been successful as a self-instruction training tool. The heart of the new training method is Learn INFORM. This audio cassette/workbook training kit, published in October 1981, was designed to teach new users how to search ABI/INFORM and to help more experienced searchers sharpen their searching skills.

The step-by-step workbook includes exercises, search samples and a guide to using ABI/INFORM on each system where the file is available.

The 35-minute audio cassette is a dialogue between an information specialist and an end user. As the specialist tells the end user about online searching, the training participant works through the accompanying text and learns concepts and tips for searching ABI/INFORM.

In 1982 we offered the audio tape/workbook training method to online user groups in an effort to judge its effectiveness in a group setting.

The Group Sessions

We sent letters to heads of online user groups outlining the session format and offering the free materials.

After much discussion in our firm and analysis based on our research about online training, we proposed a simple, yet flexible format. The group leader operates the tape player and serves as moderator. The group first listens to the audio cassette and works through the accompanying workbook, pausing for a review at the end of each of the first four sections. These reviews may be done individually or as a group.

At the end of section five, three sample searches are included in the workbook. The group may work through these or on searches of their own. We provide two free passwords on systems of the group's choice. A Data Courier training representative is available on our toll-free WATS line during the session to answer questions or help with problems.

Six groups responded to our initial offer. Leaders were named, and we sent each group one Learn INFORM audio cassette; a Learn INFORM workbook for each participant; one Search INFORM user guide; and ABI/INFORM Journals Lists and other appropriate literature.

Each group's designated leader received the materials and suggestions for conducting the session. Although no formal preparation was called for, several leaders did prepare additional search samples; most worked through the training program prior to the session.

In order to better determine individual reactions to the sessions, the ABI/INFORM training survey (Appendix 1) was developed. Let's look at some of the participants' reactions to this training approach.

The Survey

We sent ABI/INFORM training surveys to sixty attendees. (Because of the timing for this paper, only four of the six groups holding sessions could be included.) Forty-six surveys were returned, yielding a 77 percent response rate.

Of the individuals surveyed, about half (52 percent) had been searching more than two years, and a third (33 percent) had six months to two years search experience. Thus, 85 percent of the total had at least six months search experience.

In contrast, over half (57 percent) rarely searched ABI/INFORM, and only 15 percent searched ABI/INFORM over four times a month. In short, attendees tended to be skilled searchers who infrequently used the ABI/INFORM database.

The audio cassette and workbook were generally viewed favorably by those surveyed. About two-thirds (65 percent) said that the audio cassette presentation "held my interest," 60 percent said that the workbook is "attractive" and is "logically organized," and 100 percent felt that the audio cassette and workbook worked "very well" or "moderately well" together.

Over two-thirds (70 percent) felt that the hands-on time at the end of the session was "very helpful," although 22 percent felt that it was "not long enough."

Finally, overall responses to the session were positive. Sixty-three percent felt that the session was "informative," 46 percent felt that it was "logically designed," and 44 percent felt that it was "appropriate for my level of expertise."

Weaknesses

A few weaknesses were pointed out in the survey. Thirty-three percent felt that it was "inappropriate for my level of expertise."

One critic felt that parts of the presentation were too simplistic for experienced searchers. The session had been billed by the user groups as "useful for beginning or intermediate searchers." Attendees who had more than two years of experience were more likely to indicate that the presentation was not detailed enough for their needs.

A second criticism was that the dramatic approach portrayed in the cassette was either unrealistic or unflattering to librarians. Nearly a fourth (24 percent) of the people surveyed indicated that the characters and their tone were unsatisfactory.

Outlook

We believe that the Learn INFORM experiment was successful. We plan to continue to offer Learn INFORM group sessions to online user groups, and to continue evaluating the responses of attendees. As more feedback is gathered from attendees, more hands-on time, pre-session announcements, and other suggestions for adapting the session for more experienced searchers may be included. For example, we plan now to describe the session as appropriate for those having one year or less of search experience.

Furthermore, we will suggest that the group leader skip over selected introductory sections of the presentation if it is felt that the overall expertise of the group is high. We plan to begin offering Learn PNI group sessions in 1983, and to continue experimentation with alternative training techniques.

We feel that the use of audio visual training without professional instructors is a trend that will continue as travel costs and the demand for online training continue to increase rapidly. When we revise the program, we will be more sensitive to the dramatic nature of a tape. We have learned much from the Learn INFORM experience about the production of materials containing dramatizations as a focal point. Nuances become very important with this type of training tool; the tone or timbre of a character's voice, or unspoken but nonetheless clear aspects of an actor's personality can affect the way some listeners react. Our experience in producing Learn INFORM will help us to create more effective training programs.

In summary, Learn INFORM group sessions:

- Offer training at virtually any location
- Require little preparation
- Can be scheduled with as little as three weeks lead time
- Are available at low cost to Data Courier and the online user group.

Options to in-person training will increase in the years ahead. Initial acceptance of these alternative training methods may be less than enthusiastic. But as the programs increase in quality, and online searchers gain more exposure to alternatives, audio and video training will be a way to supplement in-person training. We believe the benefits of flexibility and economy will spark a range of new training options.

APPENDIX I: ABI/INFORM TRAINING SURVEY

1) I have been searching online (check one):

52% more than 2 years
33% 6 months to 2 years
13% less than 6 months
2% other

2) I search ABI/INFORM (check one):

0% over 10 times a month
15% 4-10 times a month
26% 1-3 times a month
57% rarely
2% no response

3) The audio cassette presentation (check as many as you like):

15% brought the session to life
65% held my interest
13% was a distraction
33% other _____

4) The workbook (check as many as you like):

60% is attractive
60% is logically organized
35% is valuable as a reference tool
28% is helpful to searchers at any level
44% facilitates learning
35% is overly simplistic
7% assumes too much search knowledge
0% is dull
0% is confusing
17% other _____

5) The audio cassette and workbook work together (check one):

46% very well
54% moderately well
0% not at all
7% other _____

6) The hands-on time at the end of the session (check as many as you like):

70% was very helpful
0% was unnecessary
22% was not long enough
0% was too long
15% other _____

7) Overall, I found the session (check as many as you like):

63% informative
46% logically designed
44% appropriate for my level of expertise
33% inappropriate for my level of expertise
7% too short
4% too long
13% other _____

8) Suggestions for improving the session: 44% _____

9) I would like to receive a copy of the Online '82 paper mentioned in the letter. My mailing address is:

52% _____